

## **NOTES ON THE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW**

One of the most rewarding experiences for a supervisor is the opportunity to discuss a job well done with a subordinate. One of the most challenging responsibilities a supervisor has is to provide a negative appraisal in a constructive manner.

The performance assessment interview is a process of evaluation rather than of criticism. It is a process which has produced disagreement not only as to the techniques to be employed but to the value of the process itself. Two extremes have been noted. The first is evidenced by the authoritarian manager, who may approach the supervisory role from a defensive position, and who is against any procedure which requires a verbal evaluation of an employee's performance. At the other extreme is the reasonably secure manager who sees the performance appraisal interview as a useful and necessary management tool in aiding the development of both the individual and the organization. A number of behaviors and attitudes are, of course, found between these two extremes.

There is no doubt that the assessment process may be seen as threatening by both the supervisor and the employee. Yet the process itself may do much to overcome any initial reluctance through providing insights into the expectations of both of those involved in terms of behaviors (and the attitudes they reflect) that affect job performance.

The aim of the suggestions below is to provide guidelines for conducting an effective performance assessment interview. These guidelines are based on the following assumptions:

1. Employees are generally interested in the job and in reaching departmental objectives.
2. Most employees have the capacity to develop in efficiency, productivity and self-satisfaction if appropriate incentives and opportunities are provided.
3. All employees are persons of dignity and integrity who have a right to influence decisions of major importance to themselves.
4. Employees are able to take positive steps toward self-development providing obstacles are identified and removed.

Three principles should be kept in mind in any interview situation:

1. The understanding which comes primarily from an employee's own efforts is generally to be preferred over the understanding which results from information provided by a supervisor.
2. The understanding which is initiated by the employee will allow greater emotional acceptance of the relationship, solution or objective than an understanding which is initiated and directed by the supervisor.
3. In order to be yourself in an interview, it is important to know yourself.

The last point implies that your basic attitudes and objectives are of particular importance during an assessment interview. If you really want to help the employee develop personally and professionally and believe that this goal can be obtained through the employee expressing his or her own ideas, opinions and feelings, then this attitude will come through. Such positive attitudes are as important as what is said or how it is said during the interview.

There are, of course, techniques of phrasing questions that will enhance employee expressiveness. The main point is that YOU will be conducting the interview and should rely on your own style rather than on stock phrases which have been memorized.

There are three basic steps that are essential to an effective interview process.

### FIRST - PLAN THE INTERVIEW

This includes:

- A. Setting aside sufficient uninterrupted time.
- B. Informing the employee when the interview is to be held. This allows both participants to prepare adequately and complete an assessment form (while optional, the procedure of requesting a completed assessment form from the employee prior to the interview allows the supervisor to obtain additional input regarding the employee's own perceptions and will pinpoint areas in which in-depth discussion may be indicated).
- C. Completing the assessment form insuring that you apply clear and consistent standards to each of the employees you are rating. It is important to remember that ratings should be based on the individual's performance in his or her position rather than on comparison with other employees in the department.

Items which should be considered in planning the interview.

**THE JOB** - Based on job standards, which requirements are crucial to performance and which are of less importance? Does successful performance of the job require specific aptitudes, knowledge or attitudes?

**THE INDIVIDUAL** - What are the employee's particular capabilities? In which areas can development take place? Has the employee improved over time in performing the job? Why did he or she improve or fail to do so? Will he or she agree with your assessment? If not, assume that your evaluation will be challenged and plan your answer. Have you properly based your judgment on a pattern of behavior rather than a particular incident? How will you handle a situation in which the employee is nervous, too serious, not serious enough or aggressive?

**YOURSELF** - What are your goals and objectives in conducting the interview? What are your feelings about the employee and the interview itself? Will you be able to handle the interview and rating objectively - excluding matters such as the employee's personal habits, beliefs or attitudes which you do or do not share and which are not directly job related?

**THE ASSESSMENT FORM** - Since the assessment interview is a general discussion of job performance, the assessment form should be used as a tool and not a substitute for a thorough discussion of the employee's overall job performance.

## **SECOND - CONDUCT THE INTERVIEW**

As mentioned previously be sure that you have allowed sufficient time which is as free from interruption as possible for the interview.

- A. Open the interview by being natural, flexible and yourself. The employee will generally follow suit. No general rules or formulas are useful in deciding what should be said initially. However, it is not advisable to jump immediately to the purpose of the discussion unless the employee expresses a desire to do so. The object is to attain a relaxed state in which two-way communication is facilitated as soon as possible.
- B. Once this has been achieved, a mutual transition to the main purpose of the discussion may be made by explaining the objectives of the appraisal. Emphasize its importance as an opportunity to develop ways in which the employee can grow and achieve job success. By appropriate questions it is essential that the employee understand the interview's constructive purpose. Whenever possible questions should not lead to yes or no or similar "end" statements. Questions such as "How did you feel about your job during the past year?" ideally are open ended but may result in a "Oh - it's been okay." Some assistance is clearly required. One approach is to repeat what was said or essentially the same comment and then remain silent. For example, "You seem to feel satisfied with the job . . . ?"
- C. The main task is to communicate a clear idea of how well the employee has performed the job, to show appreciation for his or her efforts and explore ways in which you can be more helpful in the future. The atmosphere should be one of two rational people reviewing the record. If the record indicates

underachievement, its causes should be explored followed by a discussion of the employee's strengths and an action plan for the future which will allow for increased effectiveness.

- D. Avoid talking more than the employee or about yourself. Concentrate instead on areas which will allow each of you to feel that something has been accomplished as a basis for future interviews.
- E. It is often difficult for people to realize that your accepting their feelings does not necessarily mean that you accept their behavior. You can accept anger by trying to find out what was behind it. This does not imply that you condone unacceptable behavior which resulted from anger or irritability. It is important to accept an employee as a person with feelings while simultaneously putting limits on his or her behavior. You might say something like, "I certainly think I understand why you got so upset, although I can't go along with what you did."
- F. Where a negative appraisal is involved only one rule is applicable: Be both tactful and truthful in your statements. Negative points need not sound critical if your approach is one of developing the employee. Improvement in a large number of areas at the same time most often will not be possible. Thus an action plan which calls for logically related steps toward a mutually agreed upon goal is of particular importance.

It is probable that sooner or later a discussion will end on an unpleasant note. Major differences may exist when the employee does not see or will not accept an assessment which indicates unsatisfactory performance. It is particularly important that the supervisor maintain an objective attitude and avoid a personality clash which may result from defensive attitudes. One approach is to suggest a review of the areas of disagreement at a later time. If the employee doesn't seem to want to cooperate immediately, the situation should not be forced. The key is to use your head, not your authority or your temper.

- G. Close the interview by checking to see if the employee feels that everything that he or she considers important has been covered. Take the initiative by expressing what you feel was accomplished and giving a verbal or non-verbal signal that the interview is over.

### THIRD - FOLLOW-UP

Review what was said and what happened during the interview. Make appropriate written notes for your records since details are often lost with the passage of time. Establish a schedule for future checks on each employee's performance and allow time for a follow-up interview should one be indicated. Last, but not least, assure yourself that the assessment record is not just filed and forgotten!

**EFFECTIVE LISTENING, ACTION PLANNING, AND FOLLOW-UP WILL  
PRODUCE A SUCCESSFUL AND USEFUL ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW.**